

Field Report

San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge

■ 1.0 Summary

The San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established to serve as a sanctuary for migratory waterfowl. The Refuge currently consists of 13,190 acres of open water, salt marsh, upland habitat, and agricultural lands. It represents the last great expanse of open space in the San Francisco Bay Shore Zone. The Refuge is operated and maintained by the USFWS. Current visitor activities in the Refuge include bird watching, hunting, fishing, hiking, and photography.

In the near future, the Refuge will purchase additional lands for endangered and threatened species, such as the California clapper rail, the salt marsh harvest mouse, and the California brown pelican. Ultimately, many of the current and additional lands of the Refuge will be restored to seasonal or tidal wetlands for purposes of providing migratory birds with a natural wetland habitat. In the near future, the Refuge will include approximately 20,000 acres of open water, seasonal wetlands, tidal salt marshes and uplands (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge



Planned future amenities of the Refuge will include visitor contact stations, construction of boat launch facilities, development of an active educational program and exhibits, implementation of additional hiking trails, and construction of a new Visitor Center. These planned amenities will be constructed to fit into the overall mission of the Refuge.

The majority of Refuge lands are closed to visitors and private vehicle access. Similar visitor access plans will be maintained in the future even though additional public lands

will be purchased and additional amenities, such as the new Visitor Center and educational programs, are planned for implementation.

Transportation vehicle access to the Refuge is limited to several informal and limited size parking lots along State Route 37 (SR 37), that cuts through the southern boundary of the site along the San Francisco Bay. In most cases, hunters, fisherman, and other visitors tend to park on the side of SR 37 to access locations in the Refuge. Visitors can also access Mare Island to visit the USFWS offices and the proposed Visitor Center expected to be constructed on Mare Island. Mare Island is an ex-Navy base that was recently closed and is being renovated by several entities including the City of Vallejo, the USFWS, and state of California.

There is limited need for implementation of both short- and long-term Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) primarily because:

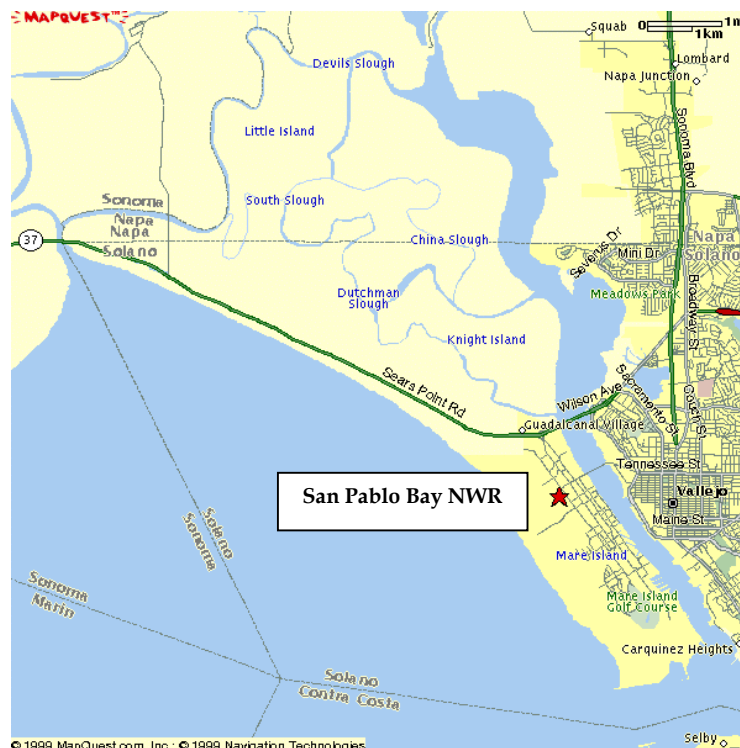
- Annual visitation is low;
- Future visitation is not expected to increase significantly over the next 10 to 20 years even though additional programs and amenities will be implemented and constructed;
- Activities are widely dispersed within the Refuge and therefore difficult to target applicable ATS strategies; and
- Vehicular access to/from the Refuge will continue to be restricted for the majority of the public lands in the short and long term.

Potential transportation improvements other than ATS strategies could be implemented to better serve the Refuge. These strategies could include improving parking lot infrastructure at key access locations for visitors along SR 37 and improving vehicle facilities at the proposed Visitor Center.

■ 2.0 Background Information

2.1 Location

The Refuge represents the last great expanse of open space in the San Francisco Bay Shore Zone. Refuge headquarters are located in the city of Vallejo, California, about 40 to 50 miles from San Francisco and Oakland, California. Visitors typically access the Refuge from areas along SR 37 that crosses the northern Bay Area from Highway 101 in Marin County (Western Bay Area) to Interstate 80 in Solano County (Eastern Bay Area). Figure 2 shows the location of the Refuge.

Figure 2. Location of the San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge

2.2 Administration and Classification

The Refuge is administered and maintained by the USFWS. The Refuge is also part of the San Francisco Bay NWR that is headquartered in the Fremont, California. Six additional wildlife Refuges – Don Edwards NWR, Antioch Dunes NWR, Salinas River NWR, Elliot Slough NWR, Marin Islands NWR, and Farallon NWR – are also managed by the San Francisco Bay NWR.

2.3 Physical Description

The Refuge occupies approximately 13,190 acres in the northern San Francisco Bay Area adjacent to unincorporated and incorporated land in Solano, Napa, Sonoma, and Marin counties. The USFWS main offices are located in the city of Vallejo (Solano County). SR 37 crosses the Refuge from Highway 101 in Marin County (Western Bay Area) to Interstate 80 in Solano County (Eastern Bay Area). SR 29, parallel to Interstate 80 also offers access to the site from points with the San Francisco Bay Area.

The USFWS will purchase additional public lands in the near future to bring the total acreage of the Refuge to 20,000 acres. Additional land acquisitions have and will include public lands to the north in Sonoma and Napa counties (using SR 12), lands previously part of the Skaggs Island Naval Base, and lands previously associated with the Mare Island Naval Base.

2.4 Mission and Goals of the National Historic Site

The USFWS prepared the Refuge Management Plan in 1988. This plan was prepared in direct response to the dramatic loss of wildlife habitat in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Refuge was established under authority of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 and was officially established in 1970. The primary mission of the Refuge is to serve as a sanctuary for migratory waterfowl. The Refuge provides visitors with activities such as bird watching, hunting, fishing, hiking, and photography.

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

The Refuge accommodates variety of different year-round activities including hunting, hiking, boating, bird watching and wildlife observations, and photography. Dog walking and camping is not permitted on Refuge public lands. It is unknown how many visitors access the Refuge annually primarily due the fact that visitors can access the Refuge at a wide variety of locations. Visitation is active in the fall and spring months as birders come to observe migrating birds. (The Refuge is part of the Pacific Coast Flyway.) Hunting is also a primary activity during the fall to spring months in the Refuge.

Tubbs Island currently is the only public access point to the Refuge. Visitors can access this area for hiking, hunting, boating, and birding. There is a parking lot available for up to 30 vehicles. Activity to the Refuge increases every January with the San Pablo Bay Flyway Festival with up to 2,000 visitors participating in this event held over a weekend. This event has been held since 1998 at the old Naval Building on Mare Island near the USFWS offices. This event will be held at the proposed Visitor Center on Mare Island once it is completed. Visitors are primarily from San Francisco Bay Area locations.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Passenger vehicles are restricted from accessing the Refuge. Typical visitor access to the Refuge is from Tubbs Island, an area located off of SR 37, with parking available for up to 30 vehicles. Other, unofficial parking locations along SR 37 are also used by visitors to access the Refuge. There is also access to Skaggs Island that is restricted to Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and USFWS use. Skaggs Island access is currently located along SR 37 and may potentially be opened to the public in the future. In addition, Refuge access to Skaggs Island from SR 12 to the north (of SR 37) may also be considered.

Traffic congestion occurs on area roadways near the Refuge primarily during commute weekday and during weekend events at the Sears Point Raceway. During these periods, congestion occurs on SR 37, SR 116, and SR 29. Refuge generated activity does not contribute to this area traffic congestion.

3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The USFWS has coordinated with various partners in Solano County regarding the reuse of Mare Island and the purchasing of additional Refuge public lands. These efforts have included:

- Working with the FAA to provide additional access to the public lands on Skaggs Island;
- Working with the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), and local city agencies to discuss and assess transportation infrastructure options for SR 37 in portions that cut through the Refuge public lands; and
- Working with the state of California agencies to promote the conversion of portions of Refuge lands to their natural habitat of Seasonal Wetlands and Tidal Salt Marshes.

The USFWS is also working with the city of Vallejo and other area communities to develop educational and environmental pilot programs primarily devoted to school-age children.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The preservation of the wildlife and natural habitat for migratory waterfowl is the primary concern of the Refuge. Ultimately, many of the current and additional lands of the Refuge will be restored to seasonal or tidal wetlands for purposes of providing migratory birds with a natural wetland habitat. The USFWS is also cleaning up hazardous material in several areas of the Refuge including land acquisitions on Mare Island. This is one of the primary goals of the Mare Island Reuse Plan.

3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Current visitor activities in the Refuge include birding, hunting, fishing, hiking, and photography. The Refuge also has plans to purchase additional lands for endangered and threatened species, such as the California clapper rail, the salt marsh harvest mouse, and the California brown pelican. The Refuge will include approximately 20,000 acres of open water, seasonal wetlands, tidal salt marshes and uplands in the near future. Additional planned future amenities will include visitor contact stations, construction of boat launch facilities, development of an active educational program and exhibits, implementation of additional hiking trails, and construction of a new Visitor Center. These planned amenities will be constructed to fit into the overall mission of the Refuge.

■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit Plans

A comprehensive Management Plan, in conjunction with the other managed NWRs of the San Francisco Bay NWR, is scheduled to be conducted sometime in the year 2000. The USFWS prepared the previous Management Plan for the Refuge in 1988.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

Other than the Mare Island Reuse Plan, there are no formal agency coordination plans in place between the Refuge and other public agencies regarding Refuge-related transportation issues. The USFWS is working with Caltrans, MTC, and other local agencies regarding potential plans and major investment studies to widen SR 37.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need

5.1 Magnitude of Need

Since typical weekday and weekend usage is currently low and also predicted to be low in the future, there will be little need for a short- and long-term ATS. For a variety of other reasons, short- and long-term ATS implementation should not be a priority because:

- Activities are widely dispersed within the facility and therefore difficult to target applicable ATS strategies; and
- Vehicular access to/from the Refuge will continue to be restricted for the majority of the public lands in the short and long term.

Visitors will continue to access the facility in the future using the parking lot facilities along SR 37 and using Mare Island roadways and facilities.

5.2 Feasible Alternatives

Restrictions of private vehicles using roadways within the current and future Refuge area reduce the potential feasibility of ATS. In addition, a limited number of visitors, dispersed visitor activities, and the mandate to protect the natural habitat for waterfowl, also contribute to the limited need for ATS.

■ 6.0 Bibliography

Refuge Fact Sheet, San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Refuge Management Plan, San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge, 1988.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. *In the Marsh on Mare Island, A Field Trip Program Offered by the San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge.*

■ 7.0 Person Interviewed

Mark Weber, Acting Refuge Manager, San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge